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"Top Attitudes To Intelligence

By DONALD McLACHLAN

Author of the book "Room 39: Naval Intelligence In Action, 1939-45," and a wartime naval intelligence officer.

I WAS not amused, but somewhat surprised, to learn lately from a former Foreign Secretary and from a former head of the Foreign Office that they had known next to nothing of the organisation and assessment of secret intelligence for which some years ago they had been responsible. They had been advised that there was no choice between knowing almost everything and knowing next to nothing: being busy men they had chosen the latter course. This information, I should add, was volunteered because both men had been reading with fascinated interest various recent books on a subject which they had once been told was too complex for them. "So *that* was what went on, was it?"

I pointed out that the men in charge of such work in the United States are publicly appointed and known to the Press; that contact between the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency and National Security Council is direct and avowed; and that "intelligence" in Washington stands for everything that contributes to forming a judgment on the policy of Ministers as it affects national defence. The smoke-cloud of prestigious secrecy with which our own intelligence work, most of it based on publicly available materials, is still concealed was dispersed in the United States 15 years ago.

Secretiveness

Yet it is only two years ago that a senior official warned me, as a journalist, that the existence of our Joint Intelligence Committee, through which agreed assessments of defence problems reach the Cabinet, was a secret. Fortunately it was possible to point to references in the *Telegraph* newspapers and to a standard book on British Government to show he had been misinformed.

These instances of secretiveness are mentioned only to make clear how very remarkable it is that a book* written by the first Director-General of Intelligence that this country has had invites public attention to the need for changes in our intelligence methods and organisation.

"It is undesirable and unhealthy," writes Maj.-Gen. Sir Kenneth Strong, "that there should be no public debate or consideration of a subject that is of crucial importance in national and international decision-making, and to which after all public funds are devoted." Politicians and officials, he declares, "think of intelligence only in terms of its seamy and less important activities," an impression which has been strengthened, until recently, by security rules which are not only archaic but almost guaranteed to produce periodical sensations. For Sir Kenneth, who retired only two years ago, intelligence is simply "an organised and scientific attempt to predict the future course of events that may affect the national interest." This, "if it is done properly, must be regarded as one of the most important activities of government."

If the author believed it was indeed being done properly in Whitehall, he would not have bravely devoted to this subject a critical last chapter of his book. He naturally takes care not to single out persons or departments for blame (in the British Army only a really canny Scot survives three major campaigns as intelligence adviser to an American Supreme Commander). But it is not difficult to see what Whitehall will read there.

It is evident that the long and sometimes bitter arguments between departments in the Joint Intelligence and other committees of the Cabinet Office are not the best way of arriving at the truth about our enemies and our difficulties. In spite of having been integrated under the title of Service Intelligence in the Ministry of Defence, sailors, soldiers and airmen still pursue many of their old inter-Service disputes, with the Foreign Office refereeing from the chair—apparently for no better reason than that it has done so for 30 years. Nor are Service officers the only offenders: civil servants from senior departments of state who are taken into independent committees still feel and show basic loyalty to the departments in which, they feel, their future lies.

At the national level, Sir Kenneth argues, this is just not good enough. Intelligence advice offered to the Cabinet "should be free of pressure or prejudice, whether engendered within government or by groups outside government. . . . The attempt at objective analysis is preferable to inter-departmental combat. . . . But this will be achieved only if outside brains are brought in to provide . . . competition, intelligence and imagination, qualities which the security and secrecy of bureaucratic life do not cultivate."

Old Ways Preferred

In the United States this is normal practice and American intelligence work is characterised by "high standards of objective scholarship, intellectual ability and dedication."

(This comes from one of the very few British officers to gain American confidence, so completely that he was once invited to give up British nationality and join the CIA at the top.")

He regards much of the criticism of the CIA as "based on ignorance or irrational prejudice." Its work in intelligence assessment "has reached a state of efficiency unapproached anywhere in Europe."

It is sad that most of our own intelligence people prefer doing things the old way, which was devised under the pressure of Second World War requirements. Uniformed officers still come to Whitehall for three-year spells—or less—to spend six months learning an intelligence job, a year or two doing it, and then six months teaching the next man. Moreover, writes Strong, "they regard this period as an unwarranted interference with their service careers" or as a way of approaching retirement without trouble. He would like to see a team of whole-timers at work, "with a professional's training and judgment, operating in close touch with the nation's decision-makers, but standing apart from any departmental allegiance that may distort the objectivity of (his) judgment."

In practice this means treating intelligence work as a special skill—which it is—to which a career can be devoted and which would attract the best brains in the country. Many would be civilians and independent of any particular department for their advancement. An intelligence man or woman (for women have proved that they are as good as men, and more discreet) would serve in more than one Ministry, for there are many facets of policy-making besides the obvious one of defence. They would perhaps belong to a single Intelligence Service which would absorb the present Security Service and the Secret Intelligence Service.

Indefensible Silence

Above all, I fancy, the recommendations of this book point to a considerable lightening of the load of power and responsibility carried by the Foreign Office. General Strong feels—and many in Whitehall agree with him—that those who make policy should not control the supply of facts on which it is based; diplomats maintaining friendly relations with a country are not the best reporters on its underlying and future trends.

Traditionally such matters are not discussed in Britain. The political parties tacitly agree not to debate them in Parliament or to ask questions about them (unless there is a "spy scandal" or security scare) thereby lumping together quite unneccesarily the greater part of [illegible]

* "*Intelligence at the Top*". By Maj.-Gen. Sir Kenneth Strong (Cassell, 42s). *Published today.*

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